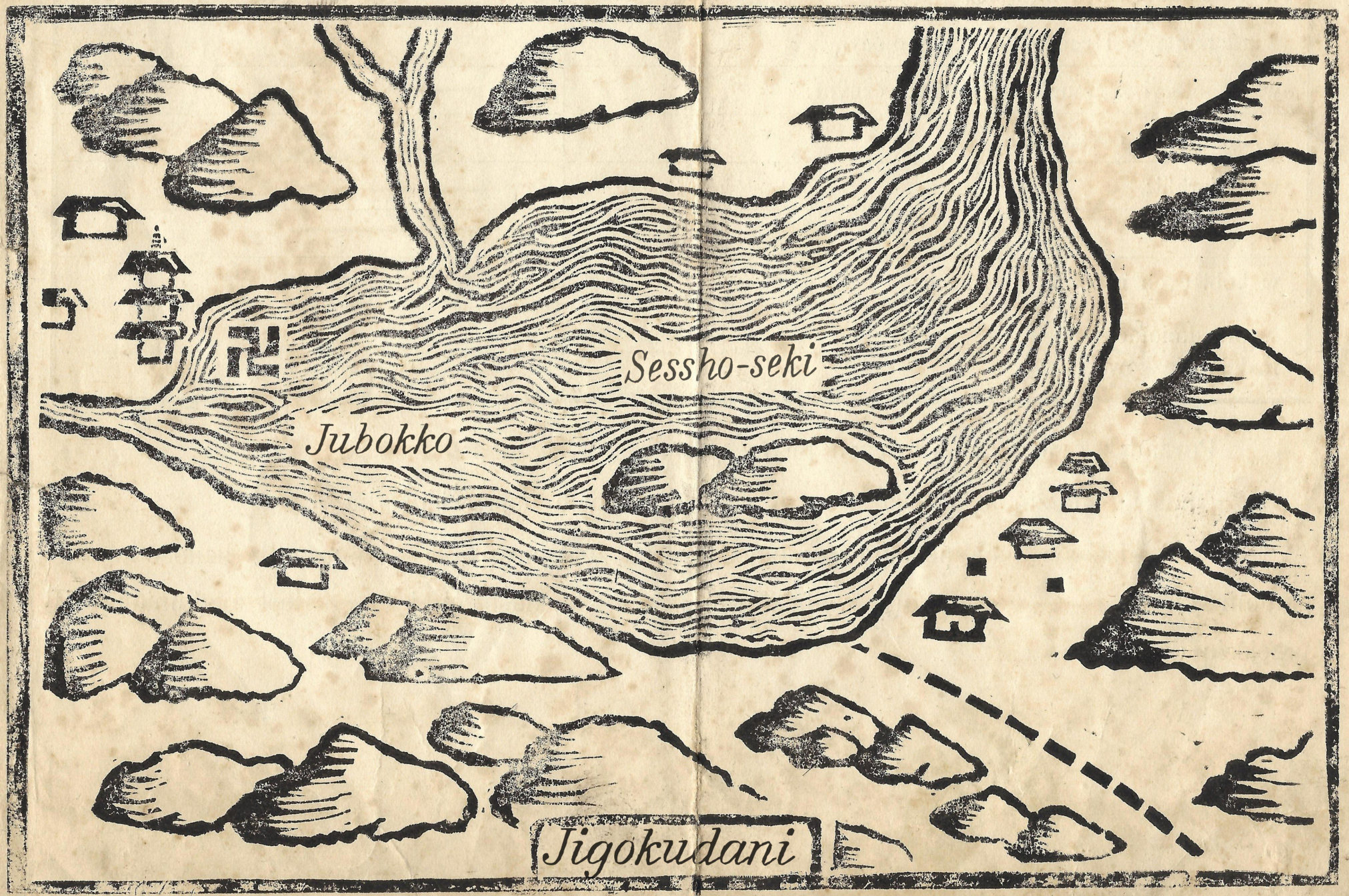
At the Hour of the Ox


Sessho-seki
Jubokko
Jigokudani

At the Hour of the Ox

A game of duelling onmiyoji

Alex Youngwood

At the Hour of the Ox

In the heart of Jigokudani, where mist clings like sorrow and sulphur scents the air, two onmiyoji, Seimei and Daisuke, were bound in an ancient feud. Their rivalry, as old as the valley, was a tale of light and shadow, each seeking to summon a kami to prove their mastery of the mystical arts.

Seimei, serene in robes of purest white, was a figure of wisdom, his control over celestial forces a testament to his calm demeanour. Daisuke, tempestuous in dark attire, was a storm incarnate, his fiery temper a mirror to his command over the chaotic elements.

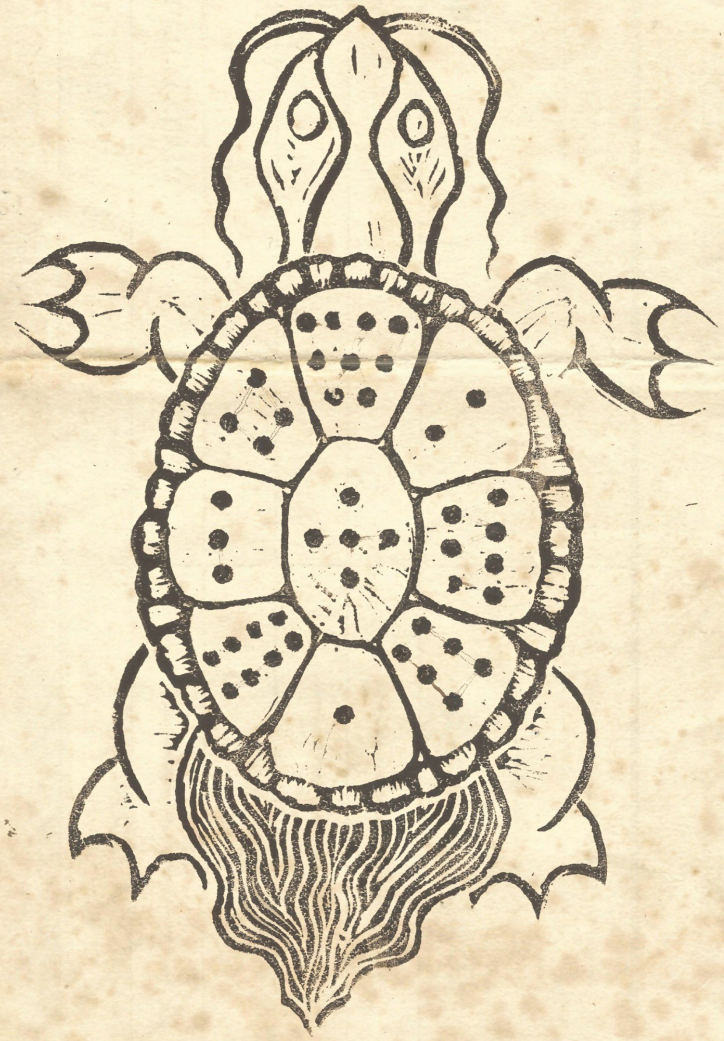
One moonless night, beneath a sky strewn with stars, the two prepared for their ultimate confrontation. Seimei, in his secluded shrine, inscribed intricate talismans and chanted ancient sutras, his voice a gentle ripple in the stillness. Daisuke, in a cave etched with runes, drew sigils in the dirt and invoked spirits with fervent incantations.

As the hour of the Ox approached, the valley trembled with anticipation. Seimei's shrine glowed with a soft, ethereal light, while Daisuke's cave pulsed with a dark, ominous energy. The few villagers who dared to live near Jigokudani watched from a distance, their hearts heavy with dread.

In the depths of the valley, two portals began to form. From Seimei's portal emerged a kami of light, radiant and serene, embodying harmony. From Daisuke's portal stepped a kami of shadows, dark and foreboding, a manifestation of chaos.

The kami, sensing each other's presence, clashed with a force that shook the very earth. Light and shadow intertwined in a dance of destruction, the valley caught in the throes of their battle. Seimei and Daisuke, their faces set with determination, directed their respective kami, each seeking to overpower the other.

As the night wore on, the kami, exhausted from their struggle, turned their gaze upon the onmiyoji. Seimei and Daisuke, realising the peril they had unleashed, attempted to regain control, but the kami were beyond their command. In a final, desperate act, the onmiyoji combined their powers, creating a barrier that sealed the kami and themselves within the valley.



When dawn broke, the valley was silent, the portals closed, and the onmiyoji gone. The villagers, venturing into Jigokudani, found only the remnants of the battle and the lingering echoes of the onmiyojis' chants. In the years that followed, the tale of Seimei and Daisuke became a legend, a sombre reminder of the dangers of hubris and the delicate balance between light and shadow.

The Lo Shu turtle — illustrates the nature of reality being composed of opposing forces — North South Metal Wood lake and wind The numbers across his shell add up to fifteen across each plane

How to Play

At the Hour of the Ox is a skirmish wargame for two players.

To play the game you will need the following:

- *Two forces of miniatures (see the section on recruiting your sect)*
- *A table of evocative scenery, 24" by 24" is the optimal size.*
- *A few regular six sided dice.*
- *A tape measure or ruler marked in inches*
- *Some small tokens or counters*
- *Two copies of the ritual summoning chart.*

- *Bonus points for playing background music to set the scene, and even more kudos if you play the game during the actual Hour of the Ox (1am-3am standard time)*

After setting up the table of scenery, both players must deploy their sect on opposite table edges to each other, placing the models as close to the edge as possible.

Turn sequence

- *Determine Initiative*
- *Movement Phase*
- *Action Phase*
- *Recovery Phase*

- Determine Initiative

Both players roll a D6, the player who rolls the highest gets to activate their miniature first for this turn.

- Movement Phase

The player who won the initiative for this turn may move a model, then the next player, alternating until all models have been moved. You may choose to forgo moving a model if you wish.

- Action Phase

You may make as many actions per turn as your action characteristic. The player with the initiative picks one model and performs all their actions, then the second player picks a model, performing its actions. Alternating in this fashion until all models on the board have used up their actions. You may choose not to perform your full allocation of actions, or any at all. Each action need not be unique, you could repeat the same action multiple times as long as you have a high enough action characteristic.

The actions that you may choose to perform are as follows:

Attack

(this is discussed in the Attacking and Defending section)

Perform the Ritual

(this is discussed in the Performing the Ritual section)

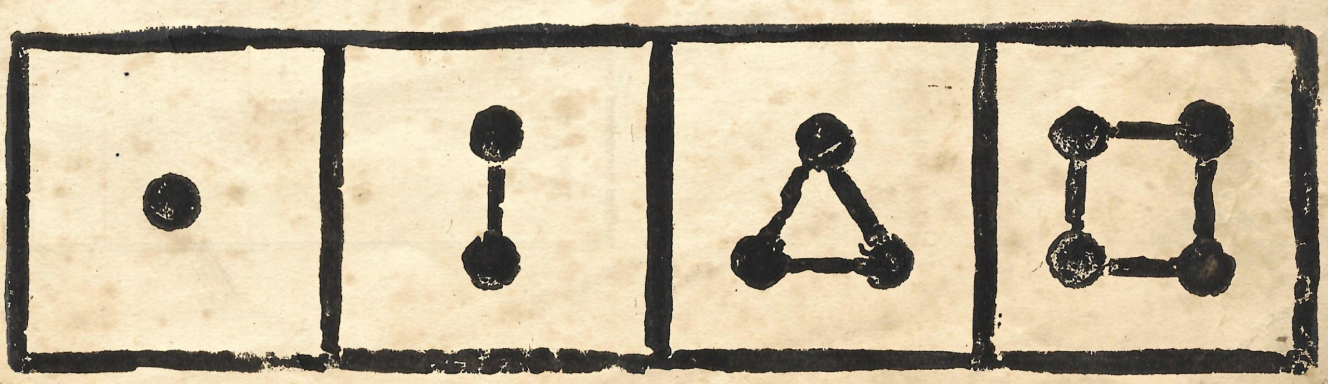
Move Again

(this is discussed in the Movement section)

- Recovery Phase

Roll a D6 for every model that is stunned, on a result of 4+ they are no longer stunned. (Note that a model with both a light and a serious wound has a -3 modifier to their dice rolls, so can never roll high enough to recover from being stunned)

After the Recovery Phase, return to the Determine Initiative Phase and start a new turn as before. Playing the game until one sect is completely eliminated, to determine the winner.



Recruiting your Sect

Summoning a deity by oneself is a foolish endeavour- the ritual itself is long and has many stages to it, there are tools to be carried and people will try to prevent you completing it. For these reasons an onmiyoji will always be accompanied by their sect of followers: apprentices, bodyguards and curious villagers.

Each player must build their own sect before the game starts, selecting members from the following pages and buying them upgrades if you wish. A standard game of At the Hour of the Ox will have an agreed upon points limit. As an example- 100 points per side will provide a game of around an hour and typically allow each player to pay for an onmiyoji and four followers, with a handful of weapons and talismans.

The only restrictions to your choices are that you may only ever have one onmiyoji per sect, and you may not spend any more points than the agreed limit.

The Onmiyoji

In the twilight's gentle glow, there dwells the onmiyoji, a sorcerer of profound might. Harmonized with the whispers of the wind and the murmurs of the earth, they stand as a spiritual beacon, guiding your band of warriors with a wisdom unmatched. A solitary light in the gathering dusk.

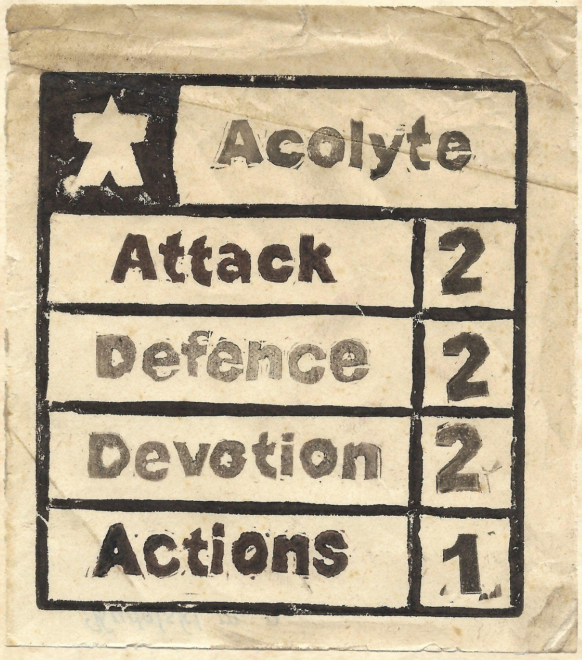
You may only have one onmiyoji.

The onmiyoji may select from the following upgrades:

Armour +2 points
Extra weapon +2 points
Omamori +1 point each

Cost: 20 points plus upgrades.

Acolytes



Beneath the formidable teachings of the onmiyoji stand many students, apprentices of diverse talents useful on your quest to summon a kami. Though not as attuned to nature's whispers as the onmiyoji, nor as mighty in battle as the bushi, they are versatile, capable of fulfilling many roles within your journey.

An acolyte may select from the following upgrades:

Armour +2 points
Extra weapon +2 points
Omamori +1 point each

Cost: 18 points plus upgrades.

Bushi

When muscle is required, the bushi's strength shines brightest. Often hired hands, these warriors sometimes find themselves drawn to the spiritual teachings of an onmiyoji, while at other times, they serve simply as bodyguards. If the subtleties of discourse or prayer fall short, a bushi and their sword often provide the necessary resolution..

Bushi	
Attack	3
Defence	3
Devotion	0
Actions	2

A bushi may select from the following upgrades:

Armour +1 point
Extra weapon +2 points
Omamori +3 points each

Cost: 18 points plus upgrades.

Villagers

Villager	
Attack	1
Defence	1
Devotion	1
Actions	1

In the shadow of Jigokudani, the villagers, poor wretches with scant means of sustenance, often find themselves in the service of the onmiyoji. Pressed into performing perilous rituals, they grasp at the chance to earn enough to feed their families for the forseeable future. Though fraught with danger, these tasks offer a glimmer of hope in their otherwise bleak existence.

Cost: 11 points.

Kami

The Kami, the sacred object of the onmiiyoji's quest, is a being of immense power summoned from the divine realm into the profane world of man. As the embodiment of a god's avatar, the kami commands profound reverence and must be treated with the utmost respect.

Kami	
Attack	5
Defence	5
Devotion	5
Actions	5

Cost: a kami cannot be bought or hired, only summoned by performing the ritual.

Upgrades

Armour: *Sometimes made of the finest materials, other times it's just a few layers of thick fabric. Whatever it is, it adds +1 to the defender's score in combat. A useful addition to anyone's equipment.*

Extra Weapon: *While it's assumed that everyone is carrying something that could act as an offensive weapon, some people pack that extra little something to give them an advantage over anyone else. An extra weapon affords the attacker a +1 to their score in combat.*

Omamori: *A good luck amulet, bought from one of the many shrines in the hills around Jigokudani. The bearer of an Omamori may re-roll any single dice roll during the game, save it until you really need that boost of luck.*

an omamori from Kifune shrine

Movement.

During the movement phase, any model that wishes may move around the board to reposition themselves in a favourable location. This may be to evade a threatening looking opponent, to get to advantageous high ground or to charge headlong into vicious combat.

Under most conditions a model can move upto 4" in any direction, this is halved to 2" if the model is crossing difficult terrain or is stunned as a result of being injured in combat. Should a stunned individual be attempting to traverse difficult terrain, they will only be able to move 1" per turn.

A model may not move over other models, they must move around them, if there is no space to fit both models, then the way is blocked and another route must be taken.

Models may move into base-contact with other models, this 'locks' them both in combat and allows them to fight each other during the action phase.

If a model attempts to move out of base-contact at any point, the remaining models from the contact may make an extra free attack against the leaver. Hacking fiercely at their rears as they flee in a cowardly fashion. Resolve this free attack immediately before moving the model.

A model may not move off the edge of the game board, to do so would be considered not only an insult to your opponent, but it would also raise questions about your dedication to summoning other-worldly beings into our mortal realm.

Difficult terrain.

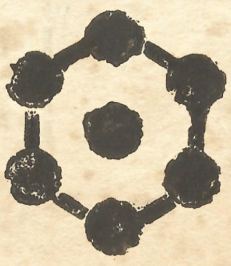
Not all ground is as easy to cross as other, a paved road or neatly tended field can be traversed with minimal thought or attention, whilst it would be foolish to sprint carelessly across a crumbling scree slope or through a low-ceilinged cavern.

Use your common sense to agree before the game what terrain on your board counts as difficult and is therefore slowing to movement- bogs, marshes and sands are obvious contenders, as are ploughed fields and ruined buildings.

Moving again.

Any model may Move Again as one of their actions during the action phase. All of the above rules about movement and terrain apply as normal during this extra move.

If they wish, they may move again for all of their actions forgoing performing other actions. This means a supernatural being like a kami can move once during its movement phase, and then up to a further five times, covering a potential 24" per turn if the player so desired.



Attacking and defending

Whilst not the most sophisticated of solutions, sometimes the most efficient means of settling your differences is with the sword or club.

During the action phase, a model that is in base-contact with another model may use one or more of its actions to attack its opponent (or when a coward tries to disengage from combat by moving out of contact).

After declaring that your model wishes to attack its opponent, from here known as the attacker and defender, roll a D6 for each model. The attacker adds their attack characteristic and any modifiers from this list to their result, the defender adds their defence characteristic and any modifiers to their result.

Attack modifiers

Attacker has an extra weapon +1
Attacker is on higher ground than the defender +1
This is the attacker's second (or higher) action this turn -1

Defence modifiers

Defender is wearing armour +1
Defender is on higher ground than the attacker +1

If the attacker's total score is higher than that of the defender, the attack was a success and a wound was caused, or perhaps even the defender was slain. Consult the following chart to see how severe the wound.

Damage

Beat the defender's score by 1	The defender is stunned. Their movement is reduced to 2"
Beat the defender's score by 2	The defender is lightly wounded. Reduce ALL their future dice rolls by -1. They are also stunned.
Beat the defender's score by 3	The defender is seriously wounded. Reduce ALL their future dice rolls by -2. They are also stunned.
Beat the defender's score by 4	The defender is slain. Remove the model from the table for the rest of the game.

Negative modifiers stack on each other, so a seriously wounded model who suffers a light wound now has a -3 to their dice rolls.

Example. A bushi with an extra weapon is attacking a villager

The bushi rolls a 4 on his dice, adds his attack characteristic of 3 and +1 for his extra weapon totalling 8.
The villager rolls a 6 and adds his defence characteristic of 1. His total score is 7. The bushi beat this score by 1 so has stunned the villager, who will now suffer from the reduced movement that comes from his injury.

Performing the Ritual

Any model may attempt to perform part of the ritual as one of its actions. This may involve reciting sutras, drawing lots, etching sigils or some other esoteric act.

You will need a copy of this ritual progression table for each player, along with a suitable counter or token to indicate how far through the ritual you are.

Acceptable counters are small bones, shells, rings, coins or pebbles, items that inherently have a spiritual energy.

Each time a model attempts to perform part of the summoning ritual roll a d6 and add their devotion statistic and any relevant modifiers. If you score a 6 or higher, that model has successfully completed a stage of the ritual, you may place your counter on the first space on the ritual table. Subsequent successful rolls from any of your models will move the counter forward one space on the summoning chart.

Once you get to the eighth square, the ritual is complete and you have summoned a kami. Remove the miniature that completed the ritual and replace it with a kami. All items, upgrades and injuries are lost with the bearer and not carried over to the kami.

After placing the kami miniature, roll a d6, if you roll a 1, the kami becomes so enraged at being awoken from its slumber that it sides with your opponent, it is controlled by your opponent as if they had summoned it for the rest of the game.

Once summoned, the kami immediately becomes the model in play and may perform their full allocation of actions.

Nature and the Ritual

Every aspect of the ritual, and the life of an onmiyoji is intrinsically linked to the ebb and flow of the natural world and the harmony of elemental forces. Certain geographical locations act as magical lightning rods, channelling energies and aiding greatly in the summoning of a kami.

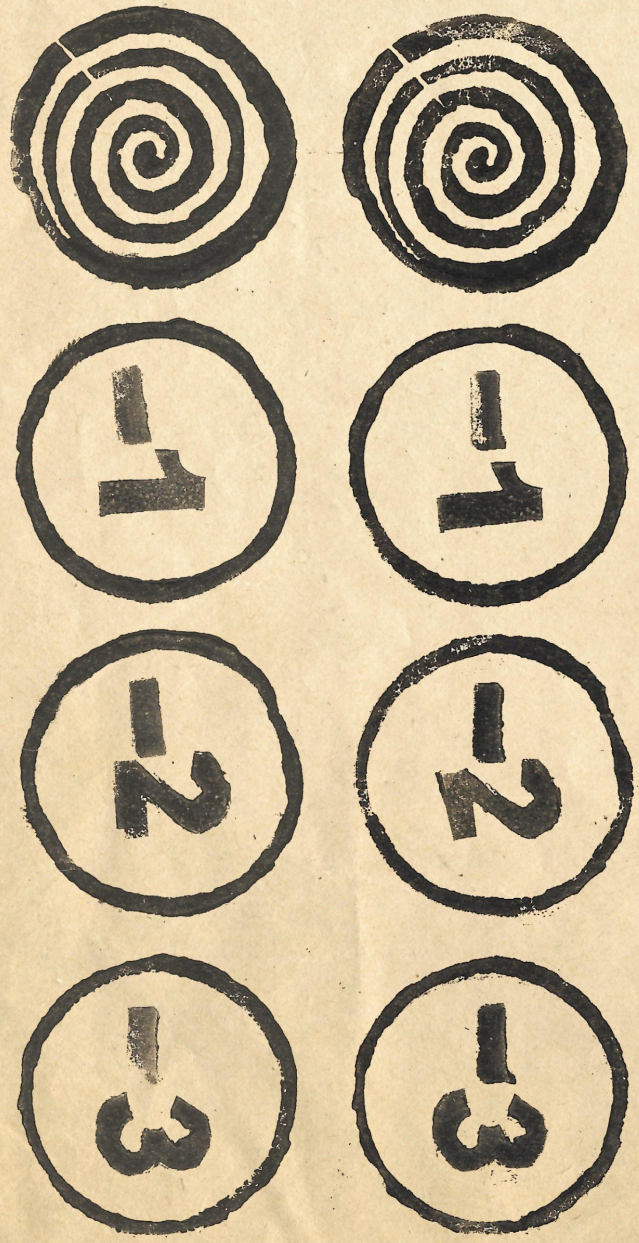
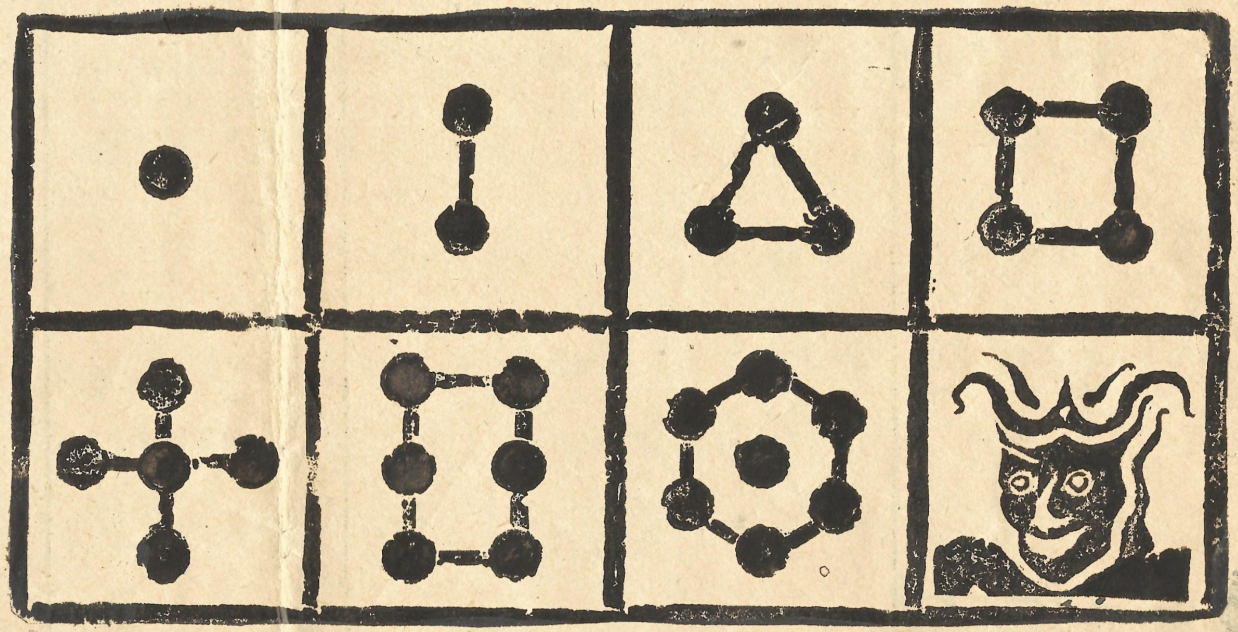
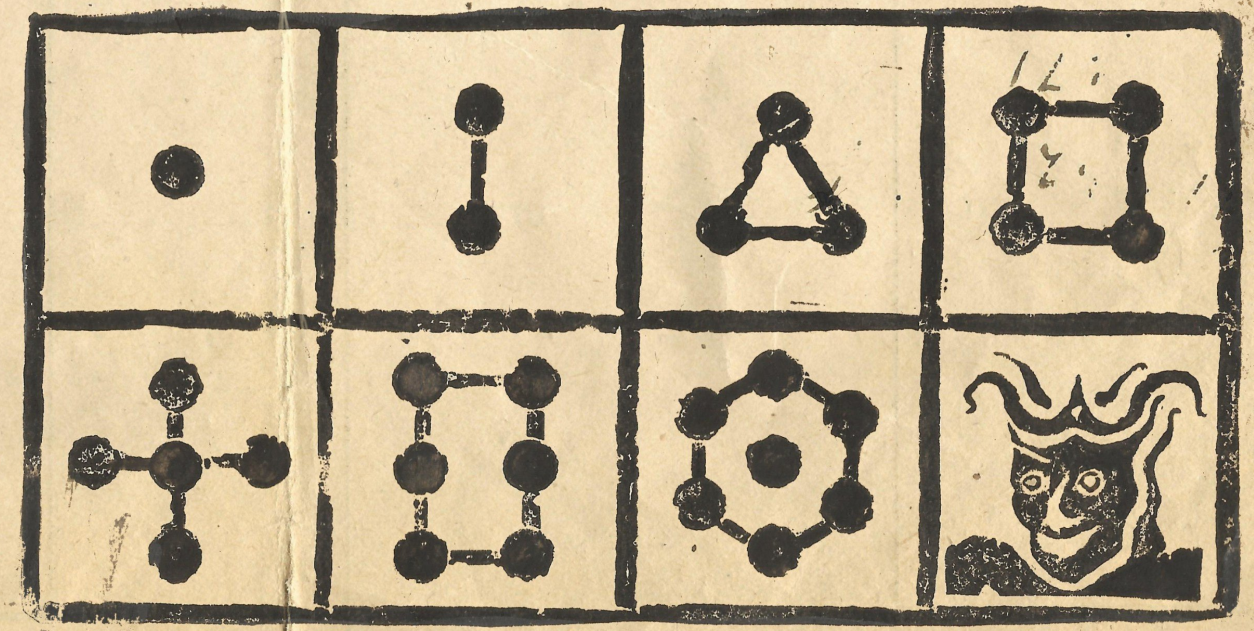
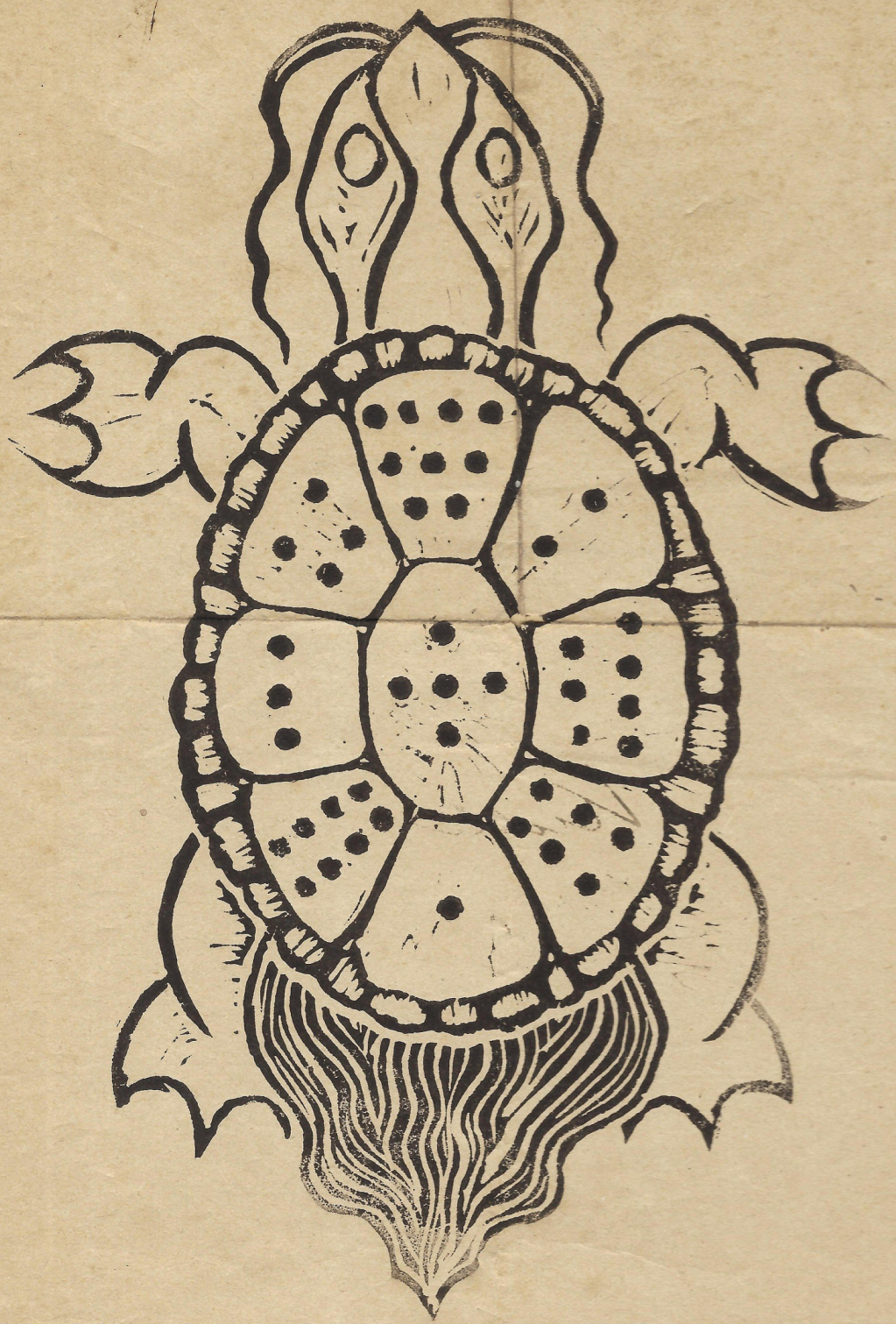
If the miniature attempting to perform part of the ritual is within 1" of either a tree or a water feature on the board, they may add +1 to their dice roll. In the rare case of a model being within 1" of both a tree and a body of water, they may add +2 to their roll, they are in an incredibly powerful location.

Ending the game

Entering into a pact with a kami is not an act to be taken lightly, once the ritual has been started, the only way out is complete annihilation of your enemy, or yourself.

The game only ends when every model on one side is slain and removed from the table, the player with models remaining being declared the winner.

Should your last model be removed while completing the ritual, and the kami turn against you joining the other side, you will have lost all your models and be defeated. Such is the will of these beings, beyond our true comprehension.

Faint echoes of fierce dreams,
sleep in the valleys of Jigokudani

Damage counters